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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1740
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 2574
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RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 0001
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2483
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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

AF/S FOR B. WALCH
DRL FOR N. WILETT
ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU
ADDIS ABABA FOR ACSS
NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR M. GAVIN
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR L. DOBBINS AND E. LOKEN
STATE PASS TO USFWS FOR M. GADD

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TAGS: [SENV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [ZI](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE AT THE EPICENTER OF RHINO POACHING

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Rhino poaching continues unabated in Zimbabwe because of lax law enforcement and what appears to be a growing Asian demand for rhino horn. In the last three years, approximately one-quarter of all Zimbabwe's black rhinos have been killed by poachers. Local conservationists are increasingly concerned that Zimbabwe's rhinos are on a path to extinction as government officials fail to take adequate action to stop the slaughter and bring the rhino killers and horn traffickers to justice. END SUMMARY.

Poaching Continues to Increase

¶2. (U) A study conducted by Zimbabwean scientists was recently submitted to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and appears on the CITES webpage. The report, "African and Asian Rhinoceroses - Status, Conservation and Trade," was carried out by the NGO TRAFFIC and details rhino conservation efforts in Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Nepal in response to a resolution at the CITES conference in The Hague in 2007 that asked for a study on rhino conservation in those three countries ahead of the next CITES meeting in Doha in March 2010.

¶3. (U) Since 2005, populations of black African rhinos have been either stable or improving in every country in Africa except Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe's black rhinos suffered significant poaching

losses in the 1990s that reduced their population to just over 300 animals in 1995. Between 1995 and 2001, some of Zimbabwe's intensive protection zones demonstrated the highest reproduction rates seen in the wild, bringing the population to 500-550 black rhinos between 2001 and 2007. However, since 2007, poaching has increased dramatically, reducing the population to just over 400 black rhinos at present.

¶4. (U) The study estimates that around 235 rhinos (both black and white) were killed in Zimbabwe between 2006 and 2009 -- half of all rhinos illegally killed in Africa during that time. In recent years there has been a noticeable trend towards more sophisticated and violent methods of killing, including AK47 assault rifles, immobilizing drugs, poison, and cross-bows.

Rhino Horn as a Cancer Cure in Vietnam?

¶5. (U) A separate CITES report says that part of the problem is a growing demand for rhino horn in Vietnam, where many believe the horn may prevent or cure cancer. The report says that cancer patients, in desperation, are willing to pay increasing sums for rhino horn cures, further driving up the price and demand for rhino horn "cures." Rhino conservationists in Zimbabwe believe Chinese and Vietnamese smugglers move rhino horn through South Africa to markets in Asia, mostly China and Vietnam.

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Lax Law Enforcement

¶5. (U) According to the TRAFFIC study, the number of illegal rhino horns entering the market has increased dramatically since 2006. Researchers have identified a minimum of 1,521 rhino horns that were destined for illegal trade since 2006, versus 664 horns between 2000 and 2005. In Zimbabwe and South Africa, in particular, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of horns "recovered" by law enforcement. In 2001, nearly 70 percent of all illegally procured horns were intercepted, but that figure has now dropped to less than 10 percent.

¶6. (U) A study in April 2009 of poaching incidents in Zimbabwe found that of 156 recorded rhino intentional killings or injuries, only 18 incidents resulted in arrests. Of the 41 people arrested, only six were convicted, three of whom were foreign nationals -- a conviction rate of less than three percent. Others who were arrested were acquitted, released on bail, or fined.

¶7. (SBU) The statistics are frustrating in the abstract, but even more maddening when examining specific cases. For example, on January 15, 2009 a 30-year-old Bulawayo woman was found in illegal possession of 38 unmarked processed elephant tusks, 52 unregistered elephant tusks, and a rhino horn. Conservationists and journalists familiar with the case told us in disgust that she was fined US\$400, the illicit elephant tusks and rhino horns were returned to her, and her husband -- who is widely known to be involved in a poaching ring -- was never investigated and is still a licensed hunter. No one bothered to investigate how this woman came to be in possession of such large quantities of illegal ivory.

¶8. (SBU) A Bulawayo-based journalist shared details of other cases with us. Notably, a group of five men in their twenties were found in possession of 17 elephant tusks in February, which disappeared shortly after being stored at the Hwange police station in Matabeleland North. The men were fined a total of US\$200, and no one knows what happened to the tusks. Separately, a group of four men were found in possession of eight tusks in October; they were fined just US\$10 each. Conservationists tell us that none of these cases was ever thoroughly investigated in order to determine how the poaching and smuggling rings worked.

¶9. (SBU) Despite considerable evidence of a growing poaching

problem, Environment Minister Frances Nhema has publicly proclaimed that things are under control. At an event in June this year, he downplayed criticism of Zimbabwe's management of its rhinos: "There are systems in place to ensure that poaching will be dealt with accordingly. There is no room for allowing poaching in the country. We are saying no to poaching." Unfortunately, there is little law enforcement evidence to support his claims.

Senior Government Involvement?

¶8. (SBU) There are persistent rumors that senior government officials may be involved in poaching and smuggling. Certain names repeatedly resurface in the rumors, including Minister of Environment Frances Nhema, the Chief of Conservation at the Parks

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and Wildlife Management Authority Vitalis Chadenga, Minister of Mines Obert Mpofu, and senior security officials including the head of the army, Constantine Chiwenga. Given the lax law enforcement and the numerous cases in which the accused person was granted bail or absconded, many believe bribes or pressure from senior government officials is thwarting justice in these cases.

¶9. (SBU) Despite these persistent allegations, neither conservationists nor journalists have been able to uncover definitive links between specific senior officials and those who are found in possession of illegal ivory or rhino horns. These same conservationists and journalists, however, have been warned not to investigate too deeply into the issue, adding more legitimacy to the concerns that top government officials are involved.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) Rhino poaching continues at an alarming rate even while the environmental and security-sector elements in government (largely controlled by ZANU-PF) continue to proclaim that they are, indeed, fighting the problem. As the March CITES meeting in Doha draws closer, we expect that Minister Nhema and others will continue to loudly defend the Zimbabwean record on conservation and blame inadequate resources (caused by Western-imposed sanctions, naturally) for any perceived shortcomings. Some in government, like Minister of Tourism Walter Mzembe, have sought to remind fellow ministers that environmental protection is key to bringing back tourists and development. However, even while those discussions continue, we expect we will continue to hear depressing reports from the field of rhino poaching. END COMMENT.

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